



To: SACUA

From: Sue Anne Bell, Chair, Government Relations Advisory Committee

Subject: Report on Activities of Government Relations Advisory Committee for 2024-2025

Members: Jowei Chen, Shevon Desai, Anouck Girard, Nakhiah Goulbourne, John Mansfield, Shahzad Mian, Sara Samuel, Beth Wilensky, Jeffrey Yackley

SACUA Liaison: Soumya Rangarajan

Guests:

[Jenna Bednar](#), Faculty Director of UMICH Votes & Democratic Engagement

[Neil Canfield](#), Executive Director of Federal Relations and Federal Research

Meeting Dates: September 12 (planning meeting), October 11, November 14, February 13, March 13, April 10

Committee Charge

1. Identify and help implement strategies for faculty and Government Relations to meaningfully promote student civic engagement regarding the 2024 election.
2. Discuss and provide faculty input on Government Relations' efforts with Vision 2034, particularly in "Democracy, Civic and Global Engagement" and "Faculty/Staff Engagement and Experience."
3. Engaged on academic freedom issues as appropriate.
4. Advise on public policy stances/directives that come from Congress or other sources, as appropriate.
5. Engage on higher education budget issues in Michigan and Congress, as appropriate.
6. Help to design a system to coordinate faculty work with Congress.

Information Obtained and Topics Discussed at GRAC meetings

1. UMICH Votes & Year of Democracy: Guest Jenna Bednar, Ph.D., Faculty Director of UMICH Votes, Co-chair of Year of Democracy, and Professor of Public Policy and of Political Science provided an October 2024 update.

- [UMICH Votes](#) is a nonpartisan project to build life-long voting and is a partnership with the City Clerk, Stamps, the Duderstadt, and Turn Up Turnout ([TUT](#)). In 2024, nine days of early voting were added. The state of MI had the highest youth turnout in 2022. All three campuses have had high turnout, with U-M Flint having the highest campus turnout in the nation. In 2024, to prevent long voting lines on campus, 18 City Clerk-trained peer student fellows assisted at campus voting hubs, with 15 people (in 2022 it was 5) at a time assisting with voting and registration.



- [Year of Democracy](#) is a separate, but related effort, with [three co-chairs](#), focused on how U-M can lead in democracy research. The project sponsored events, videos, Stamps-created content, graphic novels, and tools for listening across difference.

2. Key Legislative Takeaways:

- **Federal:** In January 2025, Republicans took control of all three branches of government. Members of the [Michigan Congressional Delegation](#) who sought leadership positions in 2025 include [Lisa McClain](#), [Tim Walberg](#) and [John Moolenaar](#). The Department of Energy and Department of Defense may be well-funded for grant opportunities.
- **State:** At the state level, there is divided government, with a Republican majority in the [MI House](#) and Democratic majority in [MI Senate](#).
- It is possible that action may come from higher ed professional associations and with push back from the courts.

3. Concerns and Faculty Issues:

- Federal grant cuts, both potential and realized, are an existential threat to universities and colleges across the nation. The power of funding has been used to pressure entities to do what the government wants and to punish entities that do not adhere to policies the federal government is trying to implement. Key federal issues affecting higher education include policy on China, immigration, Title IX, LGBTQ issues, antisemitism, NIH reform, and financial aid, among others. Additional concerns are the pressure to be neutral on policy issues and the negative effects on Palestinian faculty, students, medical fellows and physicians.
- For some faculty, their entire salary comes from federal grants. The federal government has partnered with research endeavors since WW2. It is not possible to just turn this structure off. There are federal policy discussions of the negotiated indirect cost rate being anywhere between 15% to 70%.
- Faculty expressed the need to come together, as a critical mass, to push back.

4. Government Relations Strategies:

- Government Relations works to convey strong narratives about the essential and far-reaching impact of U-M research, i.e. working with legislators on bills, supporting U-M faculty to provide expert testimony, and providing messaging on UM-related policy issues. See also the Office of Public Affairs [Key Issues](#) page and Government Relations [Washington D.C. Update](#). Stories are often the most effective form of messaging.
- It was noted that Representative Debbie Dingell has hosted a series of roundtables, including a 2025 event with junior researchers speaking 1-2 minutes to tell the human impacts of their research and what would happen if such research stopped. There are plans to do similar event/s in lab settings.
- Government Relations has worked on a pilot qualitative and quantitative research project to better understand how voters within the state and also nationally feel about



higher education in general and about the University of Michigan in particular. Initial results are expected by May 12, 2025. The intent is that the project could help inform messaging about U-M.

Recommendations

- It is imperative to translate the importance of funding for research and indirect costs into language that resonates with the public, such as the Hail to the Victors campaign. The public does not always understand how research impacts their lives and the economy. Funds from donors do not fill such gaps because donor funds are targeted to specific projects.
 - It is impossible to do research without the infrastructure needed to conduct scientific experiments, such as laboratory space, buildings, and lights. Cuts to indirect costs are direct costs to research, i.e. not being able to make an appointment for a child needing brain cancer treatment or trying to do research in a lab with the lights off. It is important to stay focused on the core message, i.e. cuts to research are cuts to treatment for Alzheimer's, cancer, diabetes, etc.
 - U-M is a very strong brand across the political spectrum. It is known for its health care and economic development. Michigan Medicine touches lives across the state, including in Chelsea, at [Sparrow](#), and within rural communities.
 - Affordability is an important message. Everyone can have a high quality education at U-M at a price they can afford.
 - Who the messenger is can be important in reaching different audiences, and students, recent graduates and patients can be particularly meaningful messengers.
 - Government Relations and other U-M entities are already deeply engaged in such communications. As just one example, entities within Michigan Medicine regularly meet with MM Communications to work on sharing research from a human perspective and to break down medical research into narratives for a wider audience.
- GRAC members expressed interest in better supporting Government Relations' efforts, including strengthening communication about the necessity of U-M research to legislators and the public. A few initial possibilities were shared:
 - To consider if there are opportunities for GRAC members and/or other identified faculty, with Government Relations' guidance and support, to more directly engage with legislators and/or assist with legislator engagement.
 - To collaborate with OVPR and U-M Communications regarding messaging and overlapping goals regarding legislative actions and higher education policy.
 - Interest was shared about educating the general public about what a PhD is, how selective they are, how they drive research, and a Ph.D.'s relevance in fields beyond medicine. It is critical to the mission of the university to communicate the value of a Ph.D. and to audiences such as government and business.